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Written statement* submitted by Prahar, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2018]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Dead alarm to the Assamese Language and Script

Language is an important part of our lives. It is a uniquely human gift which let us communicate and differentiates us from primates. But language is much more than just a means of communication. It is also an inseparable part of our culture. Language and culture are closely related. Script and language plays a vital role in the development of human civilization and culture.

Many scripts of the world are included into several international standards. But unfortunately, many prominent scripts of the world are not incorporated in these standards showing various so called reasons. For example, Assamese script and culture are among the ancient cultures of the world. But Unicode Standard has consistently denied existence of the Assamese script. ALA-LC Romanization Table maintained by the US Library of Congress has Assamese script it, but it is represented in Sanskritised Bengali form and they adamantly refuse to correct the same. Since ISO Standard ISO-10646 is synchronized with Unicode Standard there is no Assamese script in ISO-10646, ISO-15924 and ISO-15919 standards, where it should have been included.

Here we are providing some fact sheets surveyed by the prominent intellects of Assam finding the reason why the Assamese language should get their own slot in ISO standard and why this language should include as an independent script.

How old or ancient is the civilisation of Assam vis-à-vis that of Bengal ?

The temporal ancientness of the civilisation in Assam, which was known as Kamrup in the ancient times compared to that of Bengal, is best described by great Bengali scholar Acharya Sir Prafulla Chandra Roy. He held the view that when civilization was practically non-existent in Bengal, Assam had an empire of its own.

How old is the Assamese script ?

The early 5th century inscription of Nagajari-Khanikar gaon in Golaghat District of Assam is considered as the oldest inscription in Assamese script discovered till date in Assam.

Why is the Assamese script a primordial script

By its forms, Assamese script is a primordial script, it's forms are not borrowed from or influenced by any other scripts. But it uses a schema similar to Brahmi. The characters of the Assamese script has many sharp triangular and angular forms, not seen in any other scripts of Asia, other than those which are influenced by it. It developed in the area of ancient Assam, which was then known as Kamrup. The kingdom of Kamrup attained a high degree of cultural and military prowess and at the zenith of its power, had sent soldier-adventurers in many directions, which led to the dispersion of many of the elements and ideas of the Assamese script to other areas, along with others elements of its culture. As per the findings coming out of the research of the Assamese historian Kanak Lal Barua, the areas of present Bengal (West Bengal State of India & Bangladesh) and the eastern portions of Bihar, as well as Odisha (Orissa), were under the rule of the Assamese (Kamrup) kings for a considerable period of time. The point to be noted here is that these forms of characters, from the Assamese script, in adapted or in altered forms are used by the Maithili (Tirhuta) and the Bengali scripts, used in eastern Bihar state and the Indian state of Bengal and the sovereign country of Bangladesh. These forms are only to be found only in the areas which were recorded to be under the rule of the ancient Assamese (Kamrup) rulers. For example they are only to be seen in the eastern portion of Bihar, not to the west of it. Assamese script's influence is also to be seen in the Tibetan and the Thai (Siamese) scripts.

Assamese script unlike the Bengali has maintained the same form in the modern era, which was there during the medieval Ahom era of Assam history, unlike the Bengali script which has changed.

What are the justifications for encoding of the Assamese script in ISO : 10646?

1. The Assamese script is an unique script having similarities with the Bengali and the Tirhuta script, but different from them and hence requires to be encoded as an independent script on its own right.

2. The presence of the Homoglyphs with the Bengali and the Tirhuta scripts and Synoglyphs within itself, warrants that it has to be encoded separately without any unification with either the Bengali or the Tirhuta script.

3. Presence of the Assamese letter "ক" as a letter for the Assamese alphabet, not as a conjunct form as in Bengali and Tirhuta scripts, is another justification. It represents the last letter of the Assamese alphabet and cannot be deleted on any account, in the name of unification of scripts.

4. If Assamese is not encoded separately, then Assamese script cannot have a Transliteration Standard in ISO : 15919. As mentioned above, the process for that has begun in the year 2012 and is still continuing, once the encoding of the script in ISO: 10646 is completed, the steps for encoding the script in ISO: 15919 can begin.

The main issue for the inclusion in ISO :15919 is that in case of all other Indic scripts a transliteration standard called IAST is applied, but in case of the Assamese script, IAST is not applicable.

The International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) is a 30 transliteration scheme that allows a lossless romanization of Indic scripts as employed by the Sanskrit language. IAST is based on a standard established by the International Congress of Orientalists at Geneva in 1894. It allows a lossless transliteration of Devanāgarī (and other Indic scripts, such as Śāradā script). All the Indian and International encodings follow the IAST for transliteration of all the Indic scripts. *The IAST however cannot be applicable in any way to the Assamese script, the problems of the Assamese script including its nonrepresentation and misrepresentations in the International Standards and encodings, are due to unjust application of the IAST to the Assamese script.*

5. The justifications which were in operation for encoding the Tirhuta script, in spite of the duplication of glyphs between it and the Bengali script, apply in case of the Assamese script, as well.

6. The justifications in operation for separate encoding the characters of the Greek, Cyrillic and Latin scripts, which are either Homoglyphs or True Duplicates, is also equally applicable for a separate encoding of the Assamese script.

7. It is seen that majority of the proposals for encoding the scripts of the world are submitted some persons, who are not native speakers of the language using the script, nor are representatives of the concerned Government. This has led to problems with the actual users of the scripts due to faulty encoding of such scripts.

The example can be cited of the wrong encoding of the Khmer script, by Michael Everson and one another, which was later corrected at the intervention of the Cambodian Government. In case of the Assamese script also, there is the role of the same individual, Michael Everson who has publicly admitted his role, for which complaint has been lodged with the ISO, on which action has also been taken. Since the Government of Assam and the Government of India has stepped in to rectify those mistakes of the past, Assamese should be encoded in ISO : 10646.31

8. The Assamese peoples rights to their script as per the Constitution of the Republic of India and the Charter of the United Nations, stands violated if the Assamese script is not encoded as independent script in ISO : 10646. The sections are quoted below :

The Constitution of India state that :

"29. (1) Any section of the citizens residing in the territory of India or any part thereof having a distinct language, script or culture of its own shall have the right to conserve the same."

United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, states that :

"Article 13
1. Indigenous people have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generation their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and persons."

Unfortunately, at a time when the people of Assam are fighting for their identity, the number of people speaking Assamese has declined surprisingly.

According to 1971 census, Assamese was spoken by 1.63 per cent of the total population of India. As per 1991 census, Assamese was spoken by 1.56 per cent. In 2001 it was 1.28 per cent and according to the latest Languages and Mother Tongue Data of 2011 Census, only 1.26 per cent of the total population of India speaks Assamese, thus recording a declining trend since 1971.

Our organization Prahar, appeals to this Council and other treaty bodies and human rights mechanisms to take adequate actions for Assamese script and culture so that it could come back from the path of vanish.